

Sermon: Imago Dei Mark 12: 13-17 Lent 3 March 3, 2024
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa, ON

An old story, shared by Christian writer Henri Nouwen:

“One day a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from his pursuers, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But then soldiers came seeking the fugitive and, everyone became very fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village down and to kill everyone in it, unless the young man was handed over to them before dawn.

The people went to the pastor of the village and asked him what to do.

He withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn. After many hours, in the early morning his eyes fell on these words: “It is better that one man dies than that the whole people be lost.”

Then the pastor closed the Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a celebration in the village because the minister had saved the lives of the people.

But the pastor did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room. That night an angel came to him, and asked, “What have you done?” He said: “I handed over the fugitive to the enemy and saved the people.”

Then the angel said: “But don’t you know that you have handed over a child of God?” “I did not know, how could I?” the minister replied anxiously.

Then the angel said: “If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known that he belonged to God.”

In the gospel today, the question of who or what belongs to God is central to the story. In this season of T4s and RSP deadlines, we might think that this story is about taxation. Some make it out to be concerned with the relationship between church and state. There is something deeper, more fundamental at stake in this conversation.

Roman rule of Judah, in Jesus day, had led to poll tax, a head tax imposed on everyone in the land, and the tax was a point of dispute and conflict.

A strange group approaches Jesus in today`s Gospel - members of 2 opposing groups with opposing views of the Roman tax join together to ask Jesus a challenging question.

The first group, the Pharisees we know: teachers of the law, protectors of the Jewish tradition. For them only God was King.

They are joined by Herodians, people who wanted to acquiesce to Rome, to cooperate with the forces of occupation. They were happy to acknowledge Caesar as ruler.

Failure to pay the Roman head tax was seen as rebellion and sedition by Rome. Failure to comply with the tax could lead to violent reminders of Rome`s dominance.

But to the devout Jew their land, their people and all it produced belonged to God.

And the tax was hated by the people. It pushed them into poverty.

So Jesus is asked the question by Herodians and Pharisees: Is it lawful to pay the head tax owed to Rome?

If Jesus said the tax should be paid, then the Pharisees would renounce him as a collaborator of Rome and the common people would reject him

If Jesus said that taxes should not be paid to Rome, then the Herodians could have him denounced to the Roman authorities as a dangerous nationalist who was encouraging revolt.

Together they ask Jesus their loaded question” Teacher... Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

Jesus, in response, asks to see a coin and asks, ‘Whose image is on the coin?’ The coin bore the image of Caesar

So his answer: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”

The coin bears Caesar’s image, and belongs to Caesar. But everything in the Jewish world view bears the image of God and so belongs to God.

Including you and me and everyone in Gods world. We are made in the image of God.

In Genesis 1: 26 God says, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness...

So God created humans in his image,
 in the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.”

We are all made in the image of God.

The Biblical scholar NT Wright talks about the idea of God making people in Gods image in Genesis and the Jewish understanding that would lie behind Jesus words. He writes that in the temples of the ancient world there would always be an image, an idol, of a god, to represent the god`s awesomeness and to be a focal point for devotion. Except that the Jewish Temple had no image of God.

In Genesis, it is Creation that is Gods Holy Place and in that Temple, human beings are the image of God. And as we join in Gods project, live together in harmony, unity, as good stewards of what God has made, we help make God present in Creation. We are made in the image of God.

In the gospel Jesus asks whose image is on the coin. The Greek word in the gospel, translated as image is Eikon.

In the Eastern Church an icon is an artistic image that is used in prayer and devotion to God. An icon is a sacred painting, prayerfully made, of Jesus or a holy person, or of a sacred event; the icon provides a window into the spiritual realm... An Icon gives a window to God.

In the Celtic Christian world view there are 3 Holy Books. The Old Testament and New Testament reveal the wonder and love of God. The third book is the Book of Creation. In the wonder of the world God made, we can glimpse the Creator behind it all. Creation is a living icon in which God may be revealed.

While other branches of the Christian tradition may be preoccupied with human faults and failings, and the fallen nature of Creation, the Celtic Christian tradition emphasized the light of God that shines in the world God made and the Divine Light that was in each person. All are made in the image of God.

Philip Newell, former director of the Iona community in Scotland, and a writer on the Celtic Christian tradition shares an experience that he had here in Ottawa during a lecture some years ago:

"I was inviting us to watch for that Light within ourselves, in the whole of our being, and to expect to glimpse that Light at the heart of one another and deep within the wisdom of other traditions.

At the end of the talk, a Mohawk elder, who had been invited to comment on the common ground between Celtic spirituality and Indigenous spirituality, stood with tears in his eyes.

He said, 'As I have listened to these themes, I have been wondering where I would be today. I have been wondering where my people would be today. And I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world today if the Christians that came to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find the Light in us.' "

"So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them;^[a] male and female he created them..."

What would our world be like if we expected to see the image of God in ourselves, in one another, and in every person that we meet?

Philip Newell again: *Will we truly awaken to the sacredness of every person regardless of gender, race, or religion...There is hope. And it is a hope based on our deepest knowing, that every human being is sacred, body and soul.*

Amen